United Nations E/CN.5/1999/2

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
15 January 1999

Original: English

Commission for Social Development
Thirty-seventh session
9–19 February 1999
Item 3 (a) (i) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development: priority theme: social services for all

Social services for all

Report of the Secretary-General

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* E/CN.5/1999/1.

99-01066 (E) 250199

Introduction

1. As part of its regular review of the implementation and follow-up of the decisions taken by the World Summit for Social Development and in accordance with the multi-year programme of work of the Commission for Social Development and the agenda for its thirty-seventh session, as approved by the Economic and Social Council in its decision 1998/226 of 28 July 1998, the Commission will consider in 1999, as one of the priority themes, the topic of social services for all.

2. The Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development[1] adopted by the World Summit at Copenhagen in March 1995 includes quantitative targets for meeting basic needs, specifically on basic education, illiteracy, life expectancy, infant and maternal mortality, health and health care, food security and malnutrition, safe drinking water and proper sanitation, and affordable and adequate shelter. The Programme of Action also calls for countries to make efforts towards reaching the goal of universal coverage for all by, and access by all to, basic social services. While it does not adopt a specific definition of social services, the Programme of Action enumerates many different services in various chapters and sections. These may be grouped under three broad headings:

(a) A category of services designed to meet the essential needs of the entire population, comprising health care, nutrition and food security, shelter, clean water and safe sanitation, personal safety, information, protection and redress under the law;

(b) A category of services designed to respond appropriately to needs that exist at different stages in an individual's lifespan, for example, the needs of infants and children (including basic education), of adolescents and youth (including services pertaining to reproductive health, maternity, parenting and job-related training), of those in the economically most active years (including services to provide training and retraining, and support during periods of job-seeking and unemployment) and of those in old age, including in retirement and in the final stages of life (in particular care in frail old age);

(c) A category of services tailored to the requirements of population groups with specific needs, including persons with disabilities, migrants and refugees, indigenous people and groups experiencing discrimination, victims of crime or violence, addicts and former addicts, former prisoners, the destitute and others.

3. In addition to the call for universal coverage for all by, and access by all to, basic services, the World Summit set forth specific goals in terms of the following: the need to maintain and raise the quality of services; the need to promote or ensure provider responsiveness to user needs; and the need to ensure efficiency and cost-effectiveness in service delivery.

4. A comprehensive review by the United Nations drawing on the work carried out within the different bodies and agencies of the United Nations system on progress made in respect of a dozen key indicators of basic needs and service provision corresponding to the targets referred to in paragraph 2 above has recently been completed and the results will be made available to the Commission. The Commission will also wish to recall and take note of the work of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) Task Force on Basic Social Services for All, established in 1995, which prepared the following materials: guidelines on basic education, a common approach to national capacity-building in tracking child and maternal mortality, primary health care, reproductive health, and women's empowerment; guidance notes on international migration and development; statistics relating to 12 key indicators; country case-studies relating to donor assistance to the social sectors; the advocacy card; a response to the question why invest in basic social services; and a compendium of social issues from the United Nations global conferences in the 1990s. This will be supplemented by more detailed background information on progress in specific areas of sectoral concerns falling within the mandate of individual entities of the United Nations system.

5. In preparing specifically for the thirty-seventh session of the Commission, the United Nations Secretariat organized two workshops, in which independent experts from all regions participated, to discuss how to expedite the implementation of the World Summit recommendations as they relate to social services. The workshops concentrated their attention on two interrelated areas, namely (a) innovation in the delivery and financing of social services and (b) ensuring access to social services of under-served populations. While taking a cross-sectoral approach, the workshops focused on education and health, as well as access to information; the latter is not traditionally regarded as a "social service" but is increasingly considered indispensable to the citizen's exercise of his or her rights and ability to access all services and evaluate their appropriateness to his or her needs.

6. The discussion in the respective workshops took account of the need to differentiate among various national

situations. The following broad country situations were kept in mind:

(a) Countries generally lacking services;

(b) Countries where the range of services is limited and coverage is available to a relatively small portion of the population;

(c) Countries with a wide range of services and generally adequate or good coverage, but where gaps in the extent or quality of coverage are nevertheless evident.

7. The last-mentioned category embraced three different historical experiences, namely, the private ownership-cum market-oriented model; the public ownership-cum centrally planned economy model; and the mixed economy model, which, in various forms, is now the global norm.

8. The outcomes of the discussions in the workshops (contained in documents E/CN.5/1999/6 and 7) have been taken into account in the preparation of the present report which also draws on the above-mentioned comprehensive review on progress in respect of basic needs and service provision, as well as on other material.

9. Departing from the analytical and descriptive format of previous years, this report confines itself to setting out suggestions and ideas that might assist the Commission in formulating its own recommendations on how to advance implementation of the Copenhagen Programme of Action as it relates to basic social services.

Suggestions and recommendations for implementation

10. This report addresses the following issues related to the provision of social services:

(a) Social service availability, and coverage;

(b) Partnership;

(c) Resources and their effective use;

(d) Information;

(e) International dimensions.

A. Social service availability and coverage

11. Ensuring the availability for all of quality basic social services, in particular education and health care, must remain a high priority for all Governments. The principal requirement for achieving such goals as education for all and health for all is making those goals central political commitments. The objective may best be promoted and implemented through nationally and locally developed strategies with full respect for all human rights and within the guidelines agreed in the Copenhagen Programme of Action and other major international conferences.

12. In all countries, to a greater or lesser extent, but especially in the developing countries, social services are not available to all population groups. The issue of which factors are responsible for this shortfall, whether in quantitative or qualitative terms, needs careful assessment in each country based on an accurate understanding of local characteristics and people's needs.

13. Those who are not served or who are under-served, and the precise reasons why, vary in each country, but certain groups tend to suffer the brunt of discrimination in many societies and need special attention. These groups are enumerated in the Copenhagen Programme of Action and in the outcomes of other global conferences.

14. Now, four years after Copenhagen, it is an appropriate time to take stock. Countries would benefit from comprehensive reviews of the way in which needs are being met by social services; how needs are perceived and assessed; how services are conceived, planned and designed; and how resources are allocated and provision organized. The results of such country reviews could prove valuable also in identifying priority areas for further international cooperation.

15. The lack of resources is a major factor limiting the provision of social services everywhere. Organizational obstacles are also important, and need addressing as a matter of priority.

16. Those who provide or finance social services have to scrutinize how, where, when and in what manner these are delivered. Tradition-bound practices, when they have outlived their original rationale, need to be abandoned or reshaped to respond to contemporary needs. For example, hours when services are available should be set to correspond more readily to user convenience; several services may be grouped around a basic service (for example, primary schooling) and may respond to several needs at the same time (this involves cross-sectoral planning); services may be provided at non-traditional sites where people naturally congregate (for example, the workplace, transport terminals, sports facilities, clubs, places of worship, markets and shopping areas); timetables may need adjusting (for example, the school year); and information about services must be made accessible to

groups with special needs (for example, disabled persons) or to cultural and linguistic minorities.

17. The planning and provision of services should also take into account changing family circumstances, the changing roles and demands on women, shifts in population age structure, and mass migration and displacement of people. A growing number of issues are acquiring an international dimension and international, or at least regional, coordination in the planning of services needs correspondingly greater attention.

18. In order to meet needs more effectively and efficiently, appropriate mechanisms have to be developed at the national and local levels in which all interested groups in society are represented, and where priorities can be fully debated, major differences in perspectives reconciled and the sometimes divergent needs of users and providers harmonized.

B. Partnership

19. Governments have primary responsibility for ensuring that basic services are available to all. This does not necessarily imply that they are solely responsible for all service delivery, or that decisions about how services are delivered should be Governments' alone. Decisions about services are properly made with the full involvement of all those who have a stake in them, with particular emphasis on users and local communities.

20. Depending on the circumstances, different partnership options are open. While in some instances Governments may wish to be the main service providers and organize delivery directly, in others their role may evolve so that government becomes more a guarantor of national minimum standards and enabler, with actual provision and delivery the responsibility of diverse agents or actors, such as quasi-governmental agencies, cooperatives, civic groups, community and other non-governmental organizations including religious communities, and the corporate or commercial private sector.

21. A true partnership among the various providers and the users needs to be based on shared goals, a sense of equity among the partners, mutual acceptance of different views, joint decision-making as appropriate, and joint commitment to the process.

22. Such a partnership can be realized through the creation of institutionalized, formal mechanisms. One such mechanism is the consultative council through which Governments and the other partners meet on a regular basis to formulate social services policy and programmes.

23. Formal mechanisms of this kind can contribute significantly to reducing or eliminating corruption and reducing waste and misuse of resources. They can ensure greater accountability and transparency and provide mechanisms for monitoring and provision of feedback with regard to service delivery.

24. Access for all to basic social services will require the necessary political will and a recognition of the importance of the right to inclusion, to accountability and to participation.

25. Better coordination is required among different providers of services, including different governmental agencies, in respect of sharing information, planning, implementing services and sharing lessons learned. It is important for the various sectors to agree and define their respective roles. Coordination should be both vertical and horizontal.

26. It is important to establish standards for measuring service delivery. These standards should be based on a common understanding of needs and desirable outcomes, as developed by Governments, other service providers and users working together. Services should be evaluated on a continuing basis and feedback provided and assessed.

27. Effective and efficient service provision will contribute to electoral support of programmes and their financing out of public revenue.

28. The provision of social services is a long-standing activity of the voluntary and non-governmental sector. Its contribution in future should be encouraged and facilitated through appropriate public policy in a spirit of partnership. It is also important that non-governmental organizations be held accountable. It is advisable for all non-governmental organizations to submit their activities to monitoring through appropriate, mutually agreed mechanisms designed to ensure high standards and some rationality in the range of services offered by all providers.

C. Resources and their effective use

29. The real resources that support the financing of social services are generated by economic activity and growth, but at the same time social services contribute to making economic growth possible. It is thus important to synchronize economic and social policy in such a way that social service provision furthers both social and economic objectives.

30. All members of society benefit from an educated, healthy, informed, secure, responsible and tolerant citizenry. Public spending to achieve this thus benefits not only the direct users of services but the community at large and provides the principal justification for allocating appropriate resources from public revenue.

31. In all countries, the major part of some social services has to be provided or supported through the public sector in order to ensure equitable access. Ensuring adequate sources of revenue to support these services is then essential.

32. National general revenues should continue to be seen as the principal source of public funds to finance social services, for reasons of both equity and efficiency.

33. To expand such revenues, various options are available: broadening the tax base, by, *inter alia*, increasing the share of direct taxes in the overall revenue mix; improving tax administration; and reducing tax exemptions and rebates.

34. The pool of such resources may be further enlarged in various ways — through the imposition, for example, of user fees and co-payments for service, through obligatory contributions such as payroll and social security taxes, and through various forms of public borrowing, as appropriate.

35. Within government budgets, the proportion of total expenditure allocated to social services reflects a political choice. Outlays on social services may well be constrained by the level of total revenue, but choices still have to be made between conflicting priorities. For example, the majority of countries have reduced the proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) allocated to military expenditure during the last decade and all could consider further reductions. Such reorientations of outlays allow allocation of increased financial resources to the services of greatest benefit to populations.

36. Experience from different countries suggests that there is great scope for improvement in the efficiency of present expenditure within the public sector on social services.

37. Such efficiency could be improved by redefining the roles, rules and incentives applicable to the various actors within the system, enhancing the involvement of a variety of service providers, increasing the focus on outcomes rather than inputs as a means of determining the allocation of resources, and enabling greater user participation in the definition and evaluation of services provided.

38. There is a need to recognize that, in addition to the critical financial resources available to public authorities, resources also encompass the resources of the private sector, and those of the not-for-profit and voluntary sector. They comprise not only financial resources, but also resources in kind: the time and effort people devote to meeting their needs, and the skills, knowledge and capacities of people, including family networks and community-based organizations. Policies need to be developed that allow all these resources, actual and latent, to be effectively mobilized and deployed.

D. Information

39. It is essential to give priority to improving access to information for all. It must be recognized that such access is a social right, which should be legally protected by society.

40. Access to information is an essential attribute of a democratic society and the basis for effective participation in decisions, including decisions regarding the provision and financing of all social services.

41. Barriers to the free flow of information should be removed where they exist. Information should be circulated in user-friendly ways.

42. In countries where existing mechanisms to generate necessary information are inadequate, the creation of autonomous bodies for this purpose may offer an innovative and financially effective approach. In addition, decentralized information networks should be established or promoted that are able to respond to rapid social, economic and political change and function as "early warning systems".

43. In many countries, increased training of information specialists, especially at the local and community level, is urgently required.

44. Governments have to be alert to the possibility that information essential to people for the making of appropriate choices and the effective exercise of their rights might gravitate from the public to the private domain, where it may be available only for a fee, thus putting less well off persons at a disadvantage.

45. Public agencies should devote more resources to spreading the use of information technology. Communal facilities can be set up in public libraries, neighbourhood agencies, places of worship, schools, community centres and government offices to allow people to have access to such information, preferably with the help of staff or volunteers.

46. Access to information technology should be facilitated for those who are home-bound, for persons with disabilities and for groups with special needs who may be in danger of marginalization without such access.

47. The possibilities opened by technological advances for making information more widely available, particularly to the under-served and disadvantaged, should be fully explored and exploited. There are important opportunities here for partnership between government and the media, public and private.

48. In the planning and delivery of social services, information management is essential. The design of any programme to deliver social services should automatically include provision for information gathering, monitoring and evaluation.

49. Information on social services should be easy to understand, and displayed or distributed where people live, work or otherwise congregate.

50. Multiple channels of information will reach the largest audience. These include public education campaigns, and printed literature as well as the electronic mass media. Support should be given to maintaining such organizations as citizens' advice bureaux, referral agencies and users' and consumers' rights organizations; these can be highly effective in facilitating access and disseminating user-friendly information.

E. International dimensions

51. In conditions of globalization, increased mobility of capital, and rapid development of footloose industries, more international attention is required to safeguard the revenue base of countries and their capacity to finance social services. The danger of downward harmonization of social services as countries try to avoid imposing tax burdens on capital and industries that might otherwise relocate should be tackled through enhanced international debate and cooperation. Other arrangements to strengthen international cooperation as regards taxation so as to minimize tax evasion and avoidance and limit tax competition are required.

52. The experiences of different countries, in terms of policy-making, planning and implementation of the provision and financing of social services, should continue to be shared through bilateral and multilateral cooperation, including through regional and international forums, seminars and workshops. An enhanced and widened sponsorship for such exchanges should be sought. At the same time, these exchanges should recognize the distinct reality of each country's situation and should not be dominated by a unique, single approach embodying a particular ideology.

53. In order to ensure that external resources, both financial and technical, make an effective contribution to the realization of the objective of extending and improving social services, the following guidelines are suggested: involving fully participants and users in conceptualizing needs and planning social services to respond to the identified needs; using to the fullest indigenous and local knowledge, wisdom and technical skills in the design and delivery of externally supported programmes; ensuring that what is offered reflects actual local needs rather than the priorities of donor organizations; avoiding onerous conditions, especially those imposed without due regard to the specifics of each country situation; and taking steps to ensure that technical assistance provided at the international level takes full account of cultural differences and sensitivities.

54. Cooperation among countries shall be based on genuine partnership, reflecting the principles of equality and justice and a shared concern for access of all citizens to quality basic social services.

Notes

[1] *Report of the World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, 6–12 March 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.8), chap. I, resolution 1, annex II.